PARATAXE SYMPOSIUM XVIII: Sprache, Leben, Literatur

Dr. Harun Badakhshi **Keynote**

Persian Cosmopolis

On a crisp spring day, complemented with lukewarm rain, a newspaper in Persian appeared for the first time in Calcutta, in the **Bengal** region of Hindostan[1] (the British Raj, later renamed 'India'), on 18 April 1822, to be precise. For the first time ever in the entire Persian Cosmopolis. Raja Rammohun Roy was the editor, the newspaper was given the name Mirat-ul-Akhbar[2], was published once a week, on Fridays. Raja Rammohun Roy was the founder of the Brahmo Samaj, a reform movement whose transformative, modernising influence was evident in many areas of politics, public administration and education, and which posthumously earned him the title "Father of the Indian Renaissance". One of the first issues featured a report on the poet-mystic Mirzā ʿAbdul Qādir 'Bīdil', who had died 102 years earlier and had enjoyed a mythical reputation and on the enigmas of his obscure yet lucid imaginary worlds in his singular poetry. Persian poetry, that manifest and solid foundation of the spirit and subjectivity of the "Persophone world"[3], was revitalised through Bīdil in Hindostan at the end of the 18th century, and not in Tehran, Herat, Bochara, Isfahan or Kabol[4]. **Bīdil** hailed from the Chaghatai **Berlas** tribe, whose ancestors originated from Middle Asia[5] (Central Asia) and had emigrated from **Badakhshan**[6] to Hindostan. Bīdil's poetry profoundly transformed the Persian language and, with it, the Persian world.

On a crisp, snow-frosted winter's day, an exhibition opened in Sarajevo in the Balkans to commemorate Maulana Jalaluddin Balkhi, known as Rumi, featuring works by prominent artists from Sarajevo[7]. It commemorates the great philosopher, mystic, poet, scholar, theologian and Sufi teacher[8] and was part of the 'Shebi-Arus' event, dedicated to the 750th anniversary

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[1] هندوستان, हिन्दुस्तान the name used for present-day India during the second millennium, from 1021 at the latest. Hindostan (often misspelled Hindustan with a u) is derived from the Persian word Hindū هندو, which in turn is rooted in the Sanskrit word Sindhu (meaning "Indus River").

[2] مرآت‌الاخبار In English: News Round-up

[3] A term coined by Bernd Fragner

[4] The Latin spelling deliberately does not follow the Eurocentric model of transcription. I adhere, with good reason, to the natural sound and expression of the Persian language in its high literary form. For example: Bochara بخارا is traditionally, i.e. eurocentrically, written as Bukhara, which is incorrect. Similarly, Kabol کابل is usually written with a 'u', i.e. Kabul, which is also incorrect. The traditional Eurocentric conventions, which correspond to local colonial 'customs', are neither accepted nor respected.

[5] Harun Badakhshi, 2024

[6] بدخشان

[7] Sarajevo Times, 23 Dezember 2023.

[8] جلال‌الدین محمد بلخی,نامدار به مولوی، مولانا و رومی . Born in Balkh بلخ in 1207 and died in Qunya قونیه in 1273. See also the entry on Rumi in Encyclopaedia Iranica: https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/rumi-philosophy/ or Encyclopaedia Britannica: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Rumi. Deutschlandfunk, 7 October 2015. Emin Lilic (2006), Reading Rumi. Rumi in Sarajevo: The

of his death. Just as Balkhi / Rumi, a giant of 13th-century Persian poetry, has been read and understood in the Balkans for centuries, so too are others, such as Hafez, Saadi and Ferdausi. Persian-language poetry in the **Balkans**, written by local, indigenous poets, has been little researched. Dr Sabaheta Gačanin[9] of the University of Sarajevo is one of the leading researchers in this fascinating field. Thomas Ruttig describes a trip to Sarajevo as follows: "On the left bank of the Miljacka … stands the Careva Džamija, the Imperial Mosque, … the tomb of Hadži Hafiz Halid [Khaled], which to my surprise, bears a Persian inscription on its knee-high marble railing…" Persian was the language the Ottomans used for most of their official business because the Ottomans were the heirs of the Seljuks. This Turkish tribal coalition from Central Asia had conquered Khorasan in the first half of the 11th century and adopted the Persian language spoken there by a sedentary, partially well-educated Iranian population. From there, they spread the practice of employing Persian-speaking scholars to other parts of the empire, including Anatolia, which they conquered on their way west and which became known as the Sultanate of Rum (1037–1194). According to E. J. W. Gibb, Persian was the language of the court, whilst Persian literature and culture predominated. The Persian influence on Turkish intellectual life intensified further in the 13th century, when many scholars, writers and poets from Persia fled to the Seljuk Empire to escape the Mongols. The Ottomans, the successors to the Seljuks, adopted Persian culture and thus promoted Persian literature for five and a half centuries and extended the use of Persian to the regions of the Balkans, which they conquered from the mid-15th century onwards. According to the Austrian Bert Fragner, a leading Iranologist, the Persian-speaking world reached an "optimal state (…) within a relatively constant geographical dimension" from the 14th to the 18th and 19th centuries, from the Balkans to Central Asia and India."[10]

On a crisp summer's day blighted by hot winds in 2024, I met a renowned calligrapher in **Bochara**, Central Asia, who elaborated to me how he and his students were working under pressure in a place that forms the cultural-geographical nucleus of the 9th-century revival of the New Persian language: namely, Bochara. Most people in Bochara speak Persian, a dialect of the high vocal aesthetic provenance, and Chagatai-Uzbek. The nationalist government restricts the use of Persian in public and official bodies and institutions. He would circumvent the imposed obstacles by using exclusively Persian poetry, both classical and modern, in calligraphic exercises with his students. As that is how it had been "all along". If government inspectors arrive, they are informed these are "religious texts from the Quran," and they are

Mevlevi Tradition in the Balkans. BABAGÂN BOOKS. Ibn Sina Research Institute, Sarajevo. The Poetical World of Jalaluddin Rumi.

[9] Sabaheta Gačanin, University of Sarajevo, Oriental Institute, Scientific advisor / Naučni savjetnik. Profil in Academia: https://unsa-ba.academia.edu/SabahetaGacanin. Werk: The Persian Divan by Ahmad Khatem Aqovalizade. 2011. Verlag Peter Lang.

[10] Thomas Ruttig (2016) What Links Sarajevo to Kabul? Impressions from the western end of the Persianate world. Online: https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/en/reports/context-culture/from-kabul-to-sarajevo-kabul-impressions-from-the-western-end-of-the-persianate-world/

left undisturbed. The discrepancy and the master's perfectly satirical avoidance lie in the inspectors' ability to read only Cyrillic, as Persian script had disappeared from the Soviet Union by 1938 after Stalin's mass murders in Central Asia. In the very place where New Persian took shape in the 9th century. Tragedy can sometimes appear as satire.

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These places, from **Bengal** to the **Balkans**, from **Bochara** to **Badakhshan**, play a decisive role in shaping our conception of the unique phenomenon of the "Persian Cosmopolis" against the backdrop of a civilisation-theoretical reevaluation. All these places lie outside what old, sedate and weary Europe has marked in its historical memory as *Persia* (Persien, Perse).

Nowadays, we know more about the expansion of Persian poetry and *adab* on the eastern shore of the Bay of Bengal, from Myanmar to Malaysia and, surprisingly, beyond that, further into southern East Asia[11]. Ottoman sultans such as Mehmed II, the Conqueror (who reigned from 1444 to 1481), who used the pseudonym Avni, Selim I (reigned from 1512 to 1520), also known as Muhibbi, and Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (1520 to 1566), who, at the height of their de facto military, administrative, territorial and economic power, composed poetry. Although they spoke Ottoman Anatolian Turkish as their mother tongue, they nevertheless produced poetry in Persian[12]. Persian poetry ran a thread from the most powerful sultans through the transcendence of history and the essence of language[13].

The **Persian Cosmopolis** is a novel **concept** of a deep-dimensional, vast spatial and temporal, transnational, trans-regional, heterogeneous and polyphonic cultural amalgam, a civilisation, beyond the nationalism of the 20th century, beyond ethnicity and the tribalism of the 21st century, and beyond primary mother tongues. It stretched from the Balkans to Bengal between the 9th and 19th centuries, and from the cities of Central Asia to the "warm waters" of the Indian Ocean. It never was, nor is today, an ethnic or even national identity, or an extrapolation thereof. Nor is there any irreversible and irreducible sole reference to the present-day country of "Iran" as a political-legal entity with precisely demarcated, internationally recognised borders. For the time being, it is a concept. We are speaking of an immense cultural geography in which, for over a millennium, Persian served as a lingua franca, uniting and

[11] Tomáš Petrů (2016) "Lands below the Winds" as Part of the Persian Cosmopolis: An Inquiry into Linguistic and Cultural Borrowings from the Persianate societies in the Malay World. Moussons Recherche en sciences humaines sur l'Asie du Sud-Est. Moussons n° 27, 2016-1, 147-161. Majid Daneshgar (2021), Persianate Aspects of the Malay-Indonesian World: Rare Manuscripts. Publication of British Institute of Persian Studies (BIPS). https://www.bips.ac.uk/recording/rare-manuscripts/. Majid Daneshgar (2023), Translating Persian Tafsir in Aceh: The Oldest Malay "Story of Joseph" at Cambridge University Library. Publication of Cambridge University Library Special Collections. https://specialcollections-blog.lib.cam.ac.uk/?p=26005 . Jennifer W. Nourse (2013) The meaning of dukun and allure of Sufi healers: How Persian cosmopolitans transformed Malay-Indonesian history. Journal of Southeast Asian Studies. Vol. 44, No. 3 (October 2013), pp. 400-422 (23 pages). Published By: Cambridge University Press. Claude Guillot (2020) Persia and the Malay World Commercial and Intellectual Exchanges. STUDIA ISLAMIKA 27(3).

[12] Murat Umut Inan (2017) Rethinking the Ottoman Imitation of Persian Poetry. Iranian Studies Volume 50, 2017 - Issue 5

[13] Martin Heidegger, Lecture „Wesen der Sprache", Collected Works.

connecting, for high culture and bureaucracy, particularly under the rule of non-Iranian dynasties such as the originally Turkic-speaking great dynasties of the Ghaznavids, Timurids, Ottomans, Safavids and Timurid Mughals. Persian gave rise to a civilisational fauna and flora at the courts and academies, in libraries, tribunals, Sufi-houses and other labyrinths.

The **Persian Cosmopolis** as a concept represents an integrated system of aesthetic, artistic, poetic and moral norms, primarily conveyed through the **Persian language,** which were *adopted* and mirrored by various population groups across the vast regions, independently of and despite their ethnic, linguistic or religious affiliations. This research is unequivocal. The term "Persian Cosmopolis" serves primarily to distinguish, in terms of civilisation theory and fundamental concepts, between the immediate, peaceful, inclusive, vibrant and enduring cultural influence of the Persian language, *adab*, aesthetics, art and poetics, and the strict religious influence of Arab Islam. The people of the Persian Cosmopolis were not necessarily ethnically homogeneous; on the contrary, then as now, ethnicity is irrelevant to this concept. Marshall Hodgson used the term "Persianate"[14] to describe cultures that were not themselves primarily core-Iranian but were "strongly influenced by the Persian language or culture", such as the Ottomans and the elite of Hindostan (of India). More recent studies (e.g. "Mana Kia", "Persianate Selves") challenge pre-modern nationalist interpretations and focus instead on how "Persianate" represented a "framework of connections, identities and shared sensibilities" rather than a **demarcated territory**, emphasising *Adab,* in this context. *Adab* is a central concept and refers to appropriate **aesthetic** norms and **ethical** forms of behaviour, thought and speech. Whilst Arabic remained the language of rigorous theological studies, Persian developed into the language of "court culture", of mystics and poets, of music and leisure. And just as important, of course, is Ferdowsi's *Schāhnāma* (Book of Kings)[15]; it is a key text of a mythical-transcendental history and a true account of events, written over three decades and presented to the Turkish-speaking King Mahmoud Ghaznavi: 60,000 verses of epic poetry, 1,000 years ago: a foundational text of humane civilisation.

Similar to Sheldon Pollock's proposed model of the "Sanskrit Cosmopolis", the Persian cosmopolis is a "placeless"', wide, boundless cultural space in which Persian was the language of the elite in administration, literature and communication, and in which *adab*, aesthetics, art, architecture and, above all and most significantly, poetics were decisive and formative for the relations, networks and constitutions of the respective cities, "countries", sultanates and kingdoms. In historical terms, the Persian cosmopolis, from the year 1000 onwards, encompassed Anatolia (the Seljuk/Ottoman empires) in West Asia, the wider region of Iran, Khorasan, Central Asia (the Samanid /Timurid empires), the Caucasus, and, crucially and significantly, the

[14] Hodgson, M (1974) The Venture of Islam
[15] شاه نامه فردوسی

Indian subcontinent (Sultanate of Delhi, Timurid Mughal Empire), with scientifically verifiable expansions deep into South-East Asia. The regions of Central Asia and West Asia alone would cover more than 12 million square kilometres, were distance important. Which is not the case; rather, we are speaking of the spiritual realm.

From a **conceptual** and **civilisational-theoretical** perspective, it is important to note that New Persian was not associated with any particular religion. This enabled it to develop into a "neutral", unifying, trans-regional language of prestige, used **equally** by Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, Christians and Jewish people.

Equally important from a **conceptual** and **civilisational-theoretical** perspective is the genuinely **ancient Greek connotation** of "cosmopolis": The Greek concept of "kosmopolis" (derived from "kosmos", meaning "world", and "polis", meaning "city") denotes the idea of being a "citizen of the world" (*kosmopolitês*) and transcending traditional loyalty to a local state (in this case, the city-state). It represents a shift from a narrow, locally confined psychopolitical identity towards a **broader, philosophical** and ethical **identification** with the whole of humanity, rooted in the idea of a universal **community**[16].

The concept I propose is genuinely deterritorialised, geographically open, radically stripped of all 20th-century nationalisms and 21st-century tribalisms, highly aesthetic, truly naïve, fundamentally musical, unifying and inclusive, polyphonic and heteroglotic. Each movement a steady poem, recited perhaps in Bengal or the Balkans, perhaps in Bochara or Badakhshan, and of course in our own beloved microcosm: **Berlin**.

Translated by Joey Bahlsen

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Sources:

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[16] Cosmopolitanism, from the ancient Greek word for "world citizenship", offers a **radical alternative** to **nationalism** and calls on individuals to see themselves as **part of a community** that transcends **national and linguistic boundaries**. It found widespread appeal during the Enlightenment in the Republic of Scholars. Its further development in the 19th century involved complex alliances with the idea of imperialism, with the experiments of the international avant-garde and modernist circles, and with the phenomenon of globalisation in the 20th century. Through these and other cultural developments, cosmopolitanism has given rise to new ways of writing, reading, translating and disseminating texts; these processes, in turn, have led to a new understanding of individual and national identity, **new forms of ethics**, and new configurations of aesthetic and political engagement. From Kant to Derrida, cosmopolitanism has consistently been regarded throughout history as a promoter of **peace and communication across borders**.

Sphere.
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